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ABSTRACT

Southeast Alternatives, the name given to the Minneapolis Public Schools' Experimental School Project, a plan testing comprehensive change in education, was initiated in 1971 with the intent to bridge the gap from research and experimentation to practice. Marcy Open School, one of the alternative elementary schools, offers flexible curriculum, scheduling and age grouping, with emphasis on helping children to learn to think and to make independent judgments. As part of a goal evaluation for the 1973-74 school year, a children's interview was designed and divided into two sections, (1) children's perceptions of choices of activities available to them during a school day, and (2) children's perceptions of the contributions of themselves, of adults, and of peers to the school environment. The same questions were asked of six of the ten classroom teachers to reveal their perceptions of the day. Results of the interview are presented in diagram form and confirm that children at Marcy School understand that they have many possible choices during the day, and that they, their teachers, and peer group, contribute to the academic and social setting of the school. (RC)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF CHOICE

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AND

CONTRIBUTION TO ENVIRONMENT

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

Marcy Open School
June, 1974

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This is a Southeast Alternatives Level I evaluation report, prepared as part of the Marcy Open School evaluation effort. Contact Ruth Anne Aldrich, evaluator, for further information.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON SOUTHEAST ALTERNATIVES

December, 1973

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The Experimental Schools Program (ESP), a plan testing comprehensive change in education, was initiated in 1971 with the intent to bridge the gap from research and experimentation to practice.

The experimental schools concept became a reality when Congress appropriated \$12 million for the fiscal year 1971 following President Nixon's message on education reform, March 30, 1970. The program was first sponsored by the United States Office of Education and now is directed by the National Institute of Education (NIE).

The Minneapolis Public School District was one of eight school districts throughout the nation that received \$10,000 planning grants to prepare a proposal for a single comprehensive K-12 project. In May, 1971 three of the eight districts, Minneapolis Public Schools, Berkeley Unified School District of Berkeley, California and Franklin Pierce School District of Tacoma, Washington, were selected as experimental school sites. There are 18 experimental school sites as of 1973.

Southeast Alternatives, the name given to the Minneapolis Public Schools' Experimental School Project, was funded for five years. On June 1, 1971, a 27-month operation grant of \$3,580,877 was made to the school district. A final 33-month contract for \$3,036,722 was approved by the National Institute of Education (NIE) on May 22, 1973.

Major factors in the selection of southeast Minneapolis as the site for the Minneapolis program were its commitment to a comprehensive proposal, past record of responsible innovation, and plan for providing parent choice of alternative schools. The 2,200 K-12 students in the project include a racially and economically diverse urban population. Southeast Minneapolis, bounded by factories, flour mills, freeways, multiple dwellings, residential

neighborhoods, shopping areas and railroads, also houses the main campus of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Stately old homes, low income apartments and expensive condominiums are all located in the area. This mixture of ages, occupations, interests, and life styles supports a diversity of views about the nature of public education which the five SEA alternative schools of parent choice reflect.

The central theme of Southeast Alternatives is to provide comprehensive change in the educational structure and programs for the better education of children. The change is accomplished by offering choices to students, teachers, and parents in the types of educational programs available, involving students, faculty and parents in educational decision-making processes and decentralizing the administrative structure of the school district to local schools.

At the elementary level four major alternative school programs are offered:

The Contemporary School at Tuttle utilizes the graded, primarily self-contained classroom structure. The basic skills of mathematics and language are developed through an individualized multi-text, multi-media approach. Students flow between their base rooms and a variety of learning centers to participate in learning activities throughout the entire school day.

The Continuous Progress primary at Pratt and the Continuous Progress intermediate at Motley allow each child to advance at his own pace without regard to grade level. Mornings are highly structured with language arts, math and social studies. Afternoons are used for two week interest groups designed and implemented by students, faculty and staff, parents and volunteers.

The Open School at Marcy offers flexible curriculum, scheduling and age grouping, with emphasis on helping children to learn to think, and to learn to make independent judgments.

The Free School (K-12) has curriculum flexibility allowing the student

to pursue areas he or she wishes to develop and experience with emphasis on making the curriculum relevant to present day issues and on enhancing students' skills, knowledge and inner autonomy for acting as free people in an environment of rapid, almost radical change. The Free School is particularly committed to recognize and oppose racist, sexist and class oppression in today's world.

At the secondary level the Free School program option is available as well as the flexible Marshall-University High School array of courses and activities. At Marshall-University High School each student with his parents' consent designs his or her educational program within a trimester system of twelve week courses. In addition to single discipline courses there are multi-disciplinary courses, independent study opportunities, and a variety of off-campus learning programs in the community.

The transitional program for grades 7-8 at Marshall-University High School has been revised to offer choices to students coming from the elementary options. An ungraded Open Classroom and graded classes are available as well as A.L.E., the Adjusted Learning Environment for students with special needs. Teachers work in teams to offer a flexible program to meet the needs of students in the transitional years.

A Teacher Center has been established to provide teachers with an opportunity to receive substantial inservice training as well as to provide an avenue for preservice experiences. An Inservice Committee made up of teachers from the schools receives proposals and acts on them, thus providing a direct role for teachers in the staff development activities. The University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Public Schools jointly operate the Teacher Center which was first initiated with federal SEA funds.

Evaluation of the SEA project is both internal and external. The Level I internal evaluation team provides day-to-day responsive formative evaluation to program decision-makers including parents, administrators, faculty, staff

and students.

The Level II Evaluation team is organized by the ARLES Corporation. This external team is known as the Minneapolis Evaluation Team (MET) and is accountable directly to N.I.E. The purpose of external evaluation is to independently collect information of a summative nature about SEA which will be of use to practicing educators who are in the process of designing, implementing or operating programs to improve education.

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHOICE AND CONTRIBUTION TO ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

One of the three top-priority goals of Marcy Open School is that children should take more responsibility for their own learning in all areas - social, academic, and physical. The Marcy Advisory Council and staff have accepted the position that the school is responsible for constructing an environment which will facilitate children's growth in goal areas. To facilitate children's learning to take responsibility, the staff has committed itself to constructing an environment that allows and encourages children to make choices and that allows them to play a major role, along with adults, in determining the social, physical, and academic environment of the school.

A portion of the goal evaluation of the school for the 1973-74 school year attempted to determine whether such choice and such a role for children was, in fact, being implemented. The goal evaluation assessed the time, materials, and activities which contributed to these, and attempted to examine the interactions between adults and children. (More complete information on that evaluation is written in "Marcy Open School: 1973-1974 Goal Evaluation," available from SEA Internal Evaluation). The evaluator concluded that observations and understanding of adult-child interactions were beyond the scope of the evaluation resources during this year. Instead, a children's interview was designed to tap, in an indirect way, how children verbally expressed their perceptions of the expectations being communicated to them.

The interview is divided into two sections, (1) children's perceptions of choices of activities available to them throughout a school day, and (2) children's perceptions of the contribution of themselves, of adults, and of peers to the school environment. The interview was conducted with the 20% random sample of children who are part of the larger goal-evaluation described above.

Children's Perceptions of Choices

Most activities at Marcy involve small groups or individual children. Even cursory observation reveals that children are not told what they must do throughout the entire day, but they are bounded by some formal and informal expectations of the adults. To determine how children perceive those expectations, they were asked a series of questions such as:

- What kinds of things happen during the first meeting of the day?
- What can you do after that meeting? What else could you do if you wanted to? What else could you do? etc., etc.
- What kinds of things can you do for reading? What else can you do? What else?.....
- What kinds of things can you do for math? What else?.....

The attempt was to probe as far as possible what all the child saw as options during the day.

The same questions were also asked of six of the ten classroom teachers to reveal their perceptions of the day. In addition, information as to what the children actually did throughout the day was available from classroom observations conducted three to four weeks earlier. Thus, a three-fold picture can be drawn from six of the classrooms:

1. The teacher's perception of the day,
2. The children's perception of the day, and
3. The same children's actual behavior during a day.

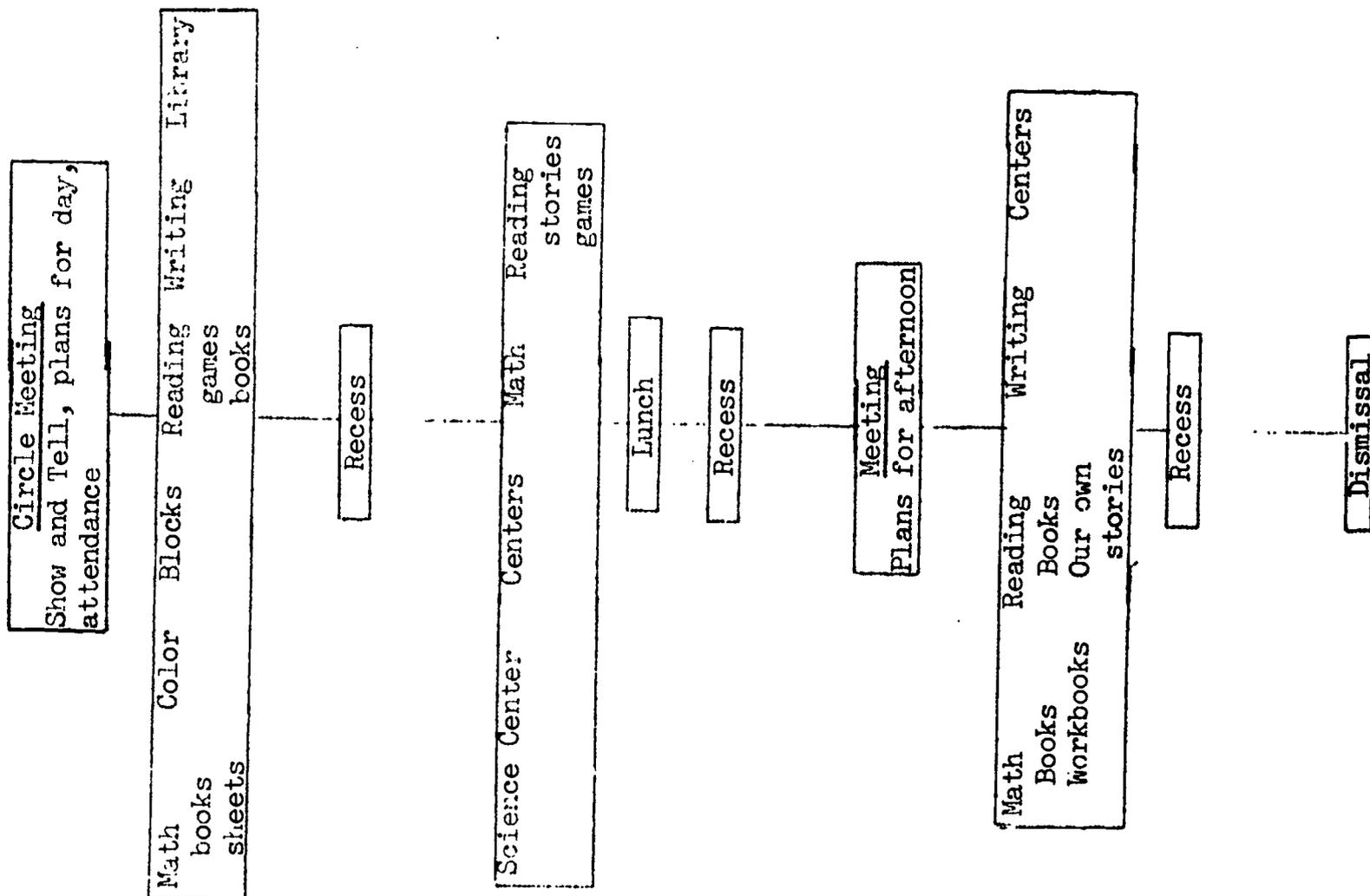
Numbers 2 and 3 are available for the four classrooms in which teachers were not interviewed.

In examining the following charts from the ten classrooms, the reader might bear in mind the following:

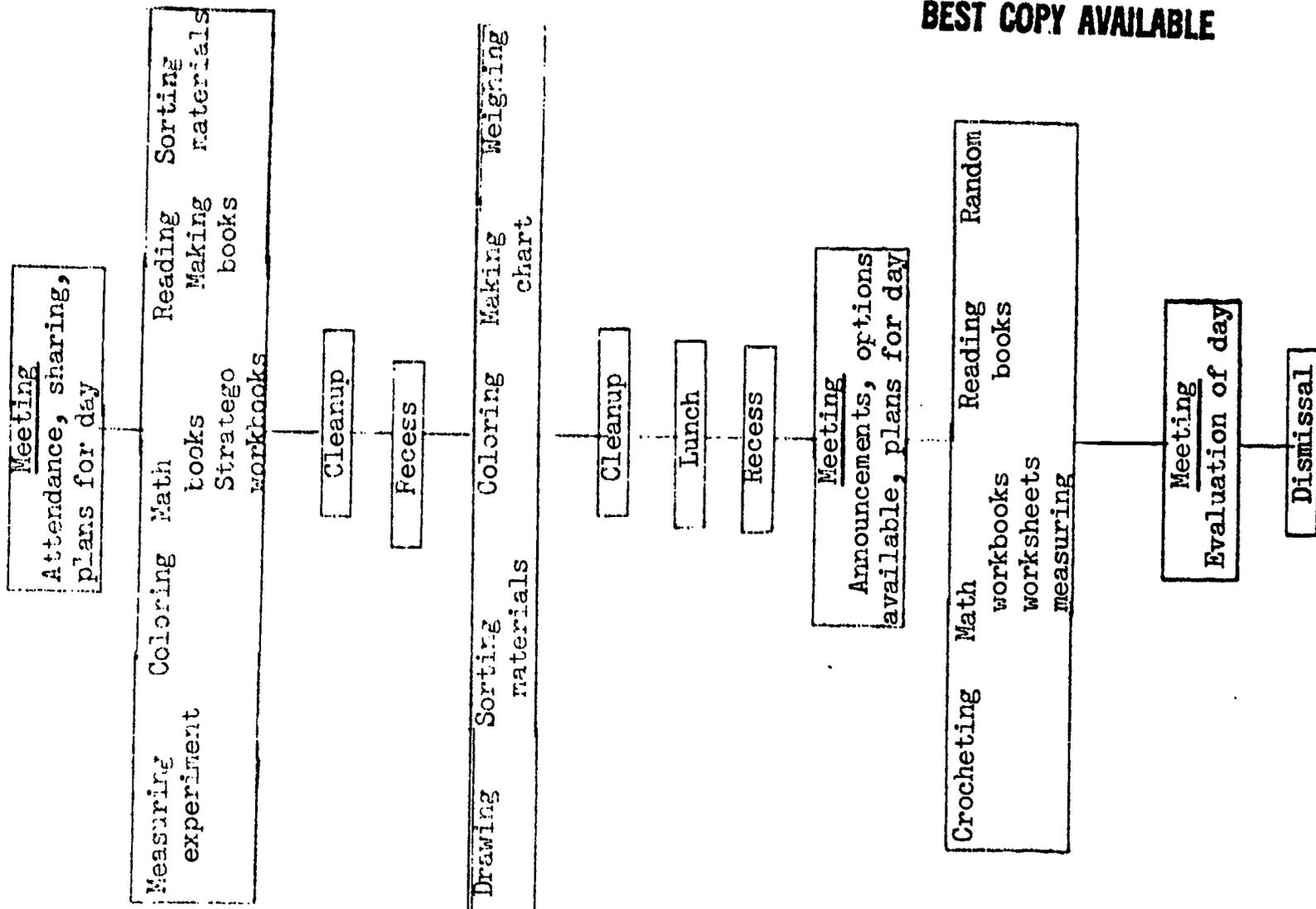
1. Level of consistency between children's verbal perceptions and their actual behavior,
2. Consistency between children's perceptions and the teacher's perceptions, both in terms of categories of activities and in terms of the variety of activities under those categories, and
3. Variation of type of structures in different classrooms.

PRIMARY ROOM A

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)

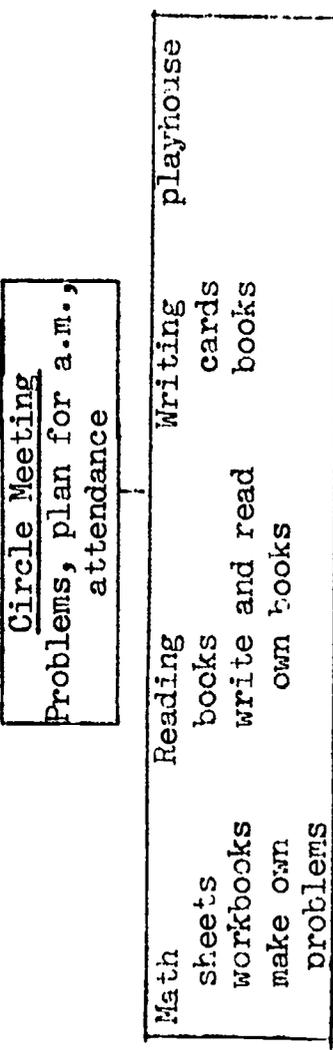


ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(5 children observed)

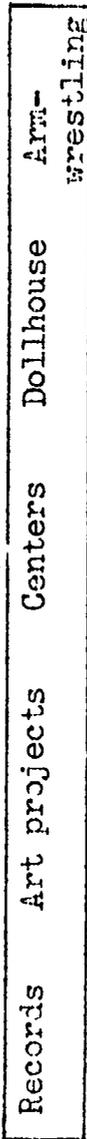


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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)



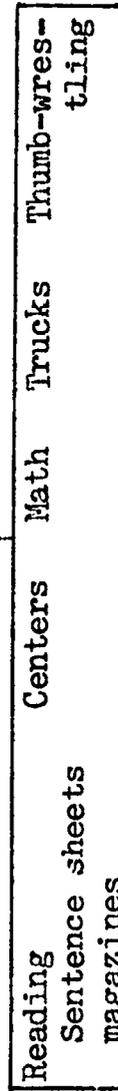
Recess



Lunch

Recess

Circle meeting



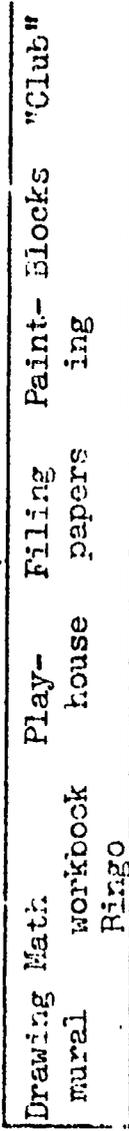
Recess

Circle Meeting
Talk about day

Dismissal

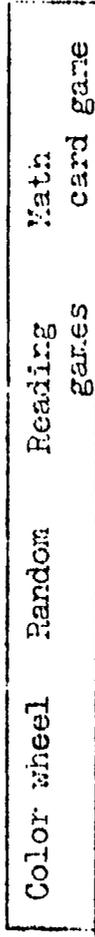
ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(5 children observed)

Meeting
Planning for day



Meeting
Evaluation - plans for after recess

Recess

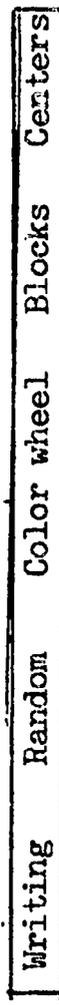


Meeting
Discussion of problem

Lunch

Recess

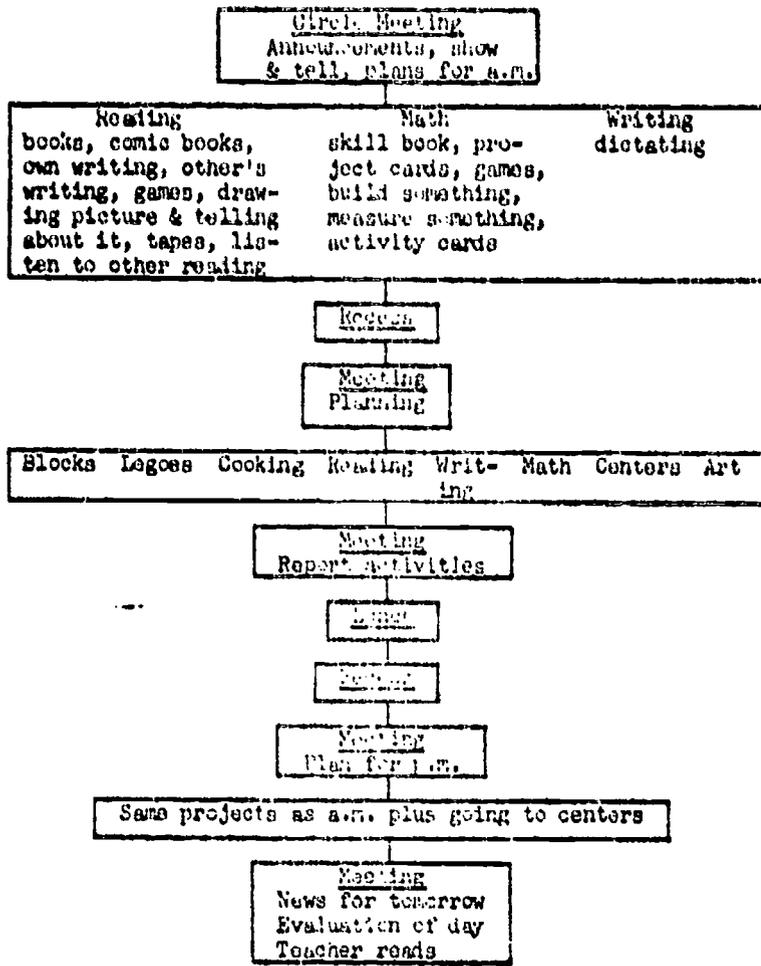
Meeting
Fantasy game



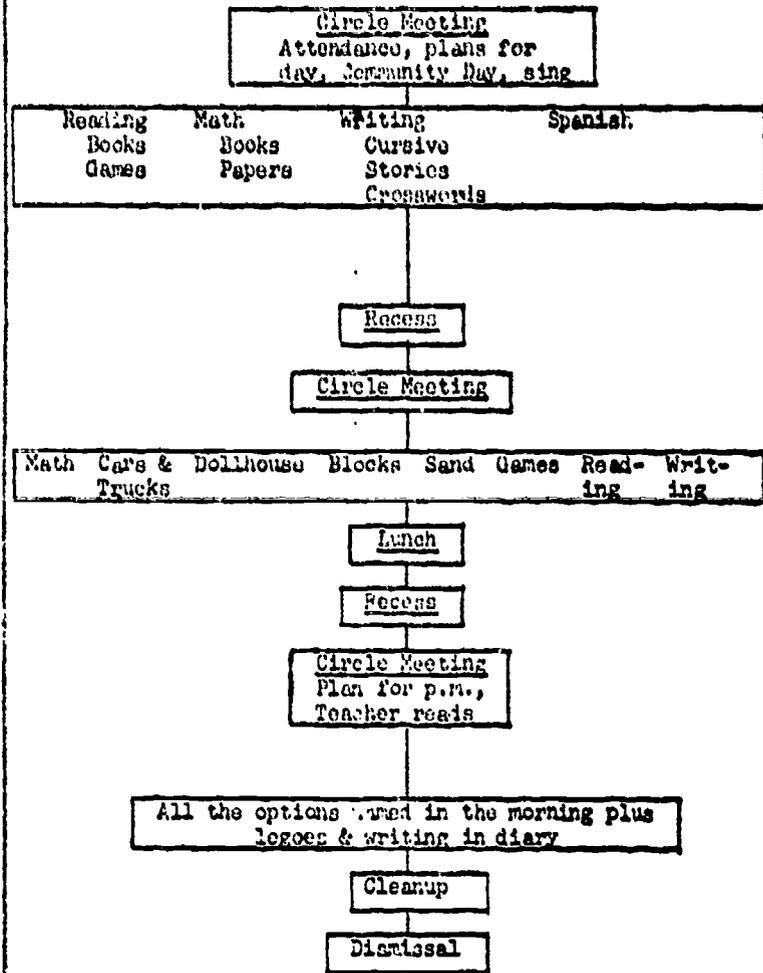
Dismissal

PRIMARY ROOM C

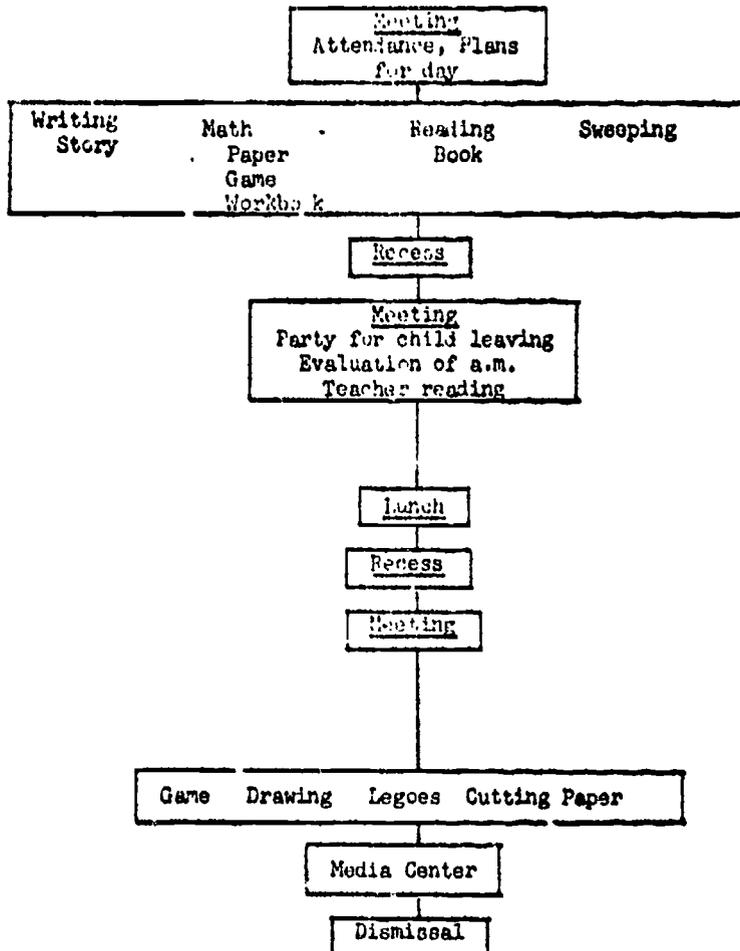
TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY



CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)

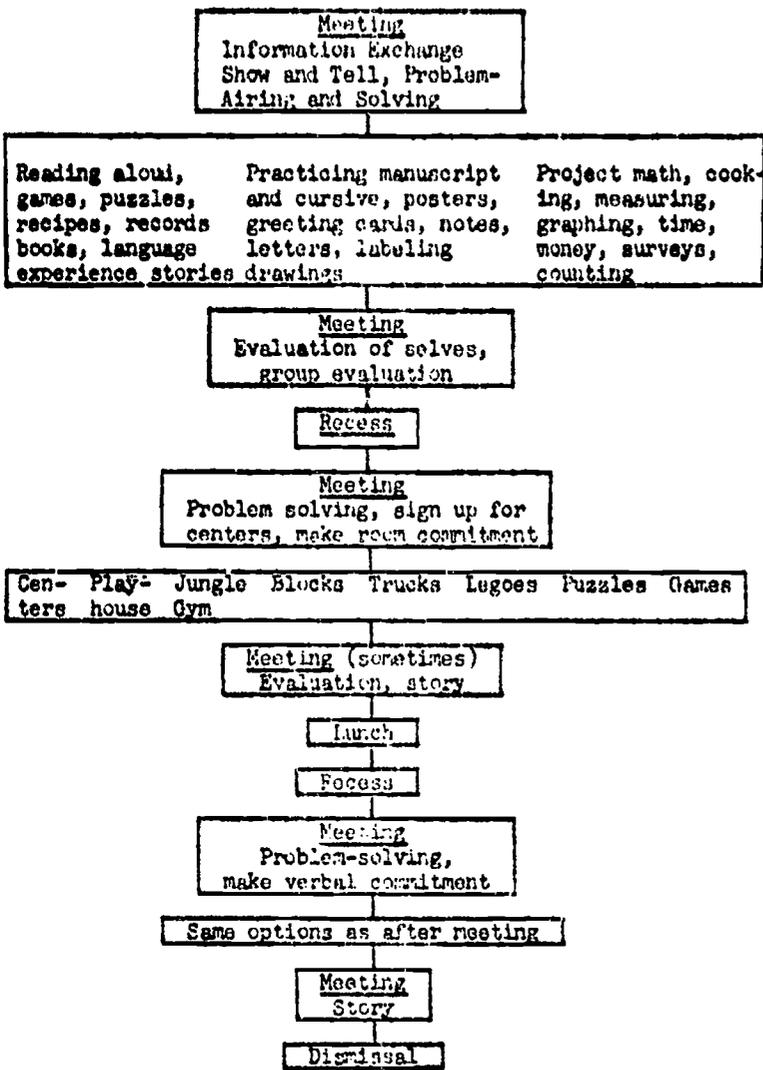


ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY

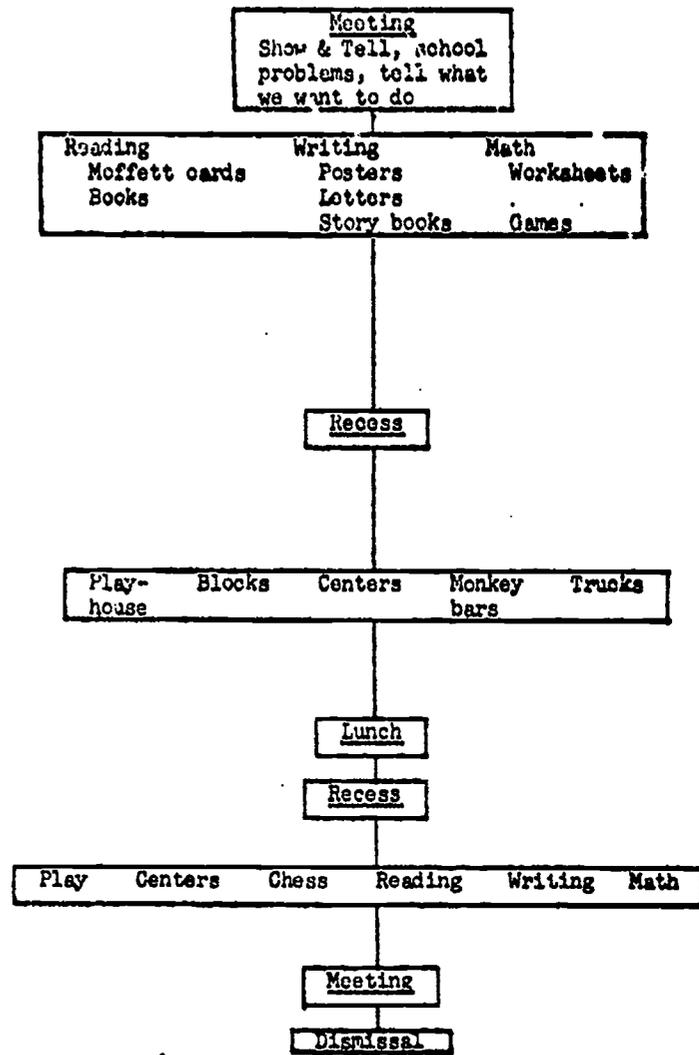


PRIMARY ROOM D

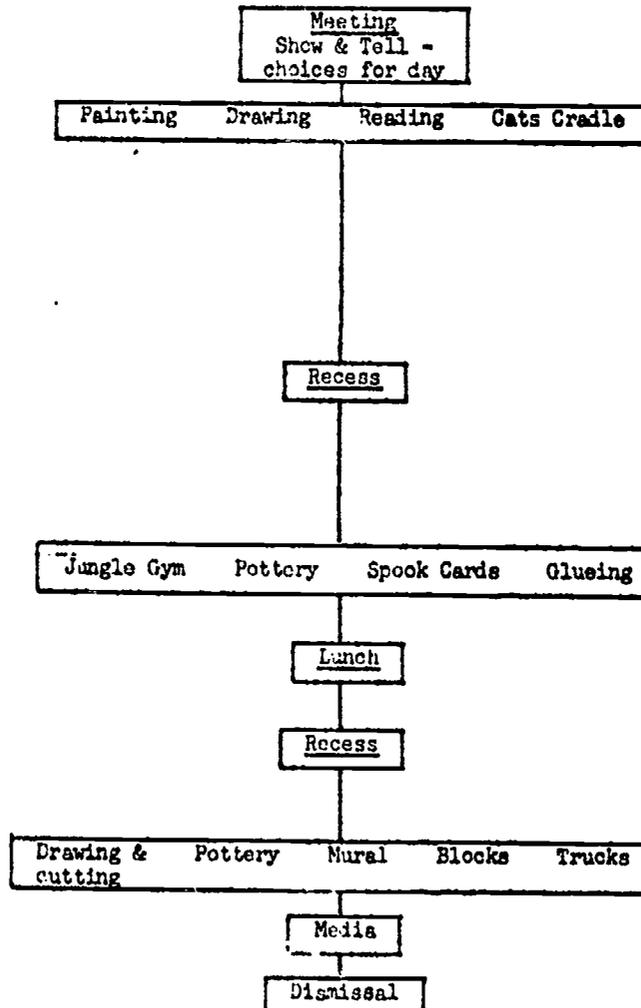
TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY



CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)



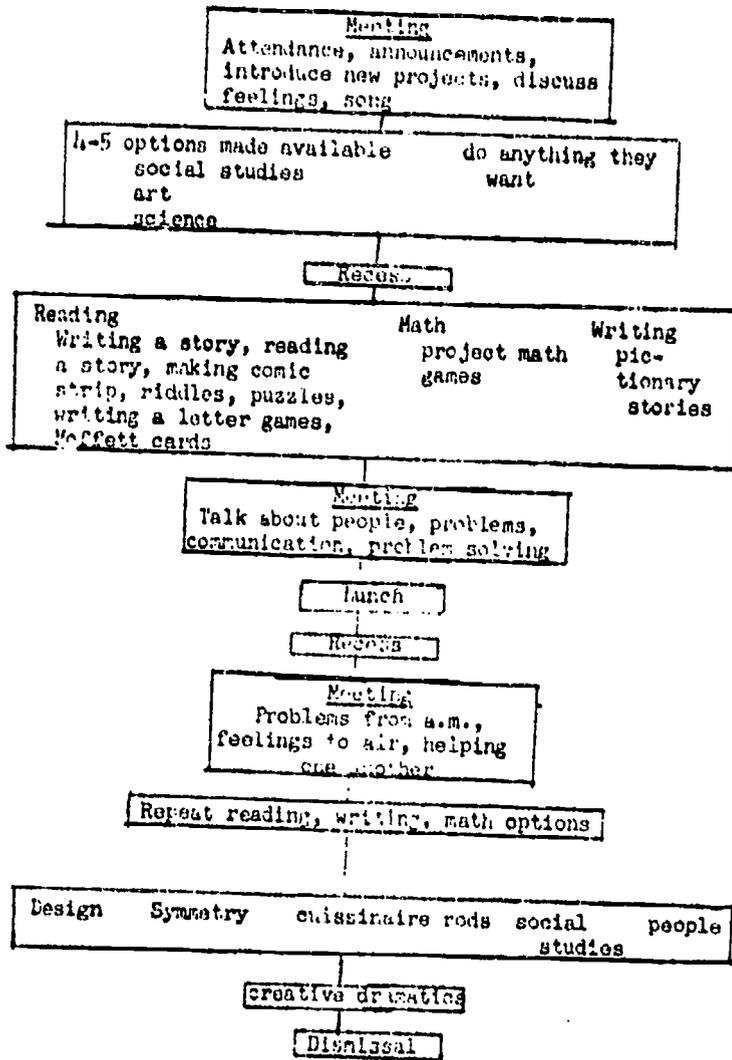
ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(4 children observed - 1 absent)



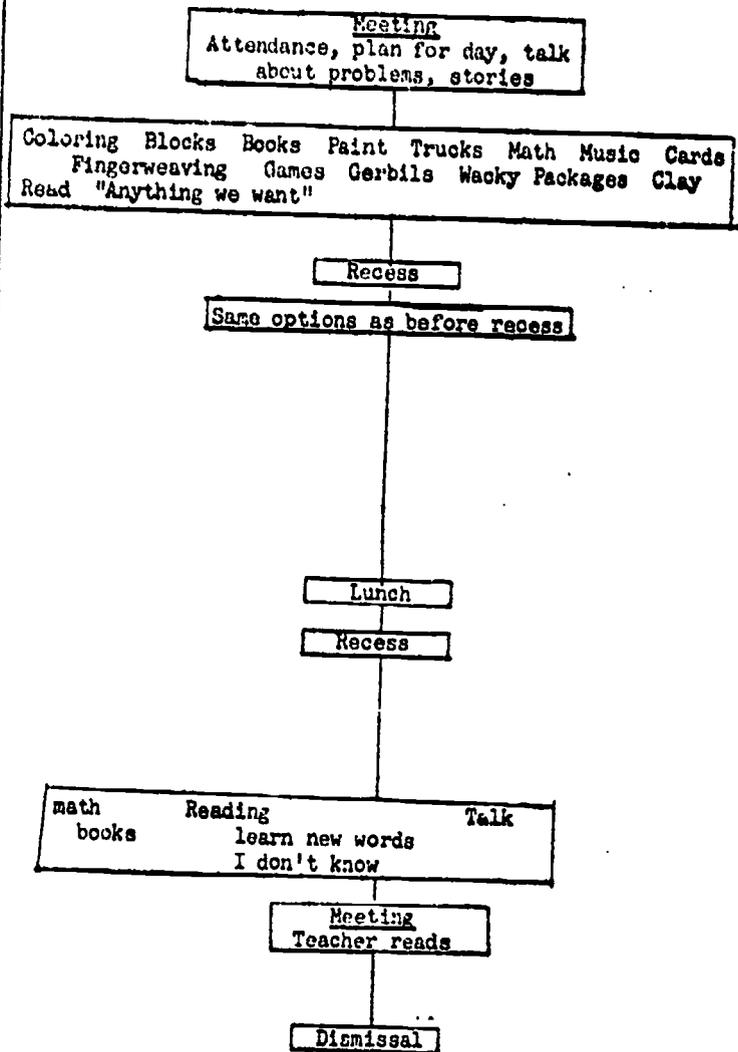
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PRIMARY ROOM E

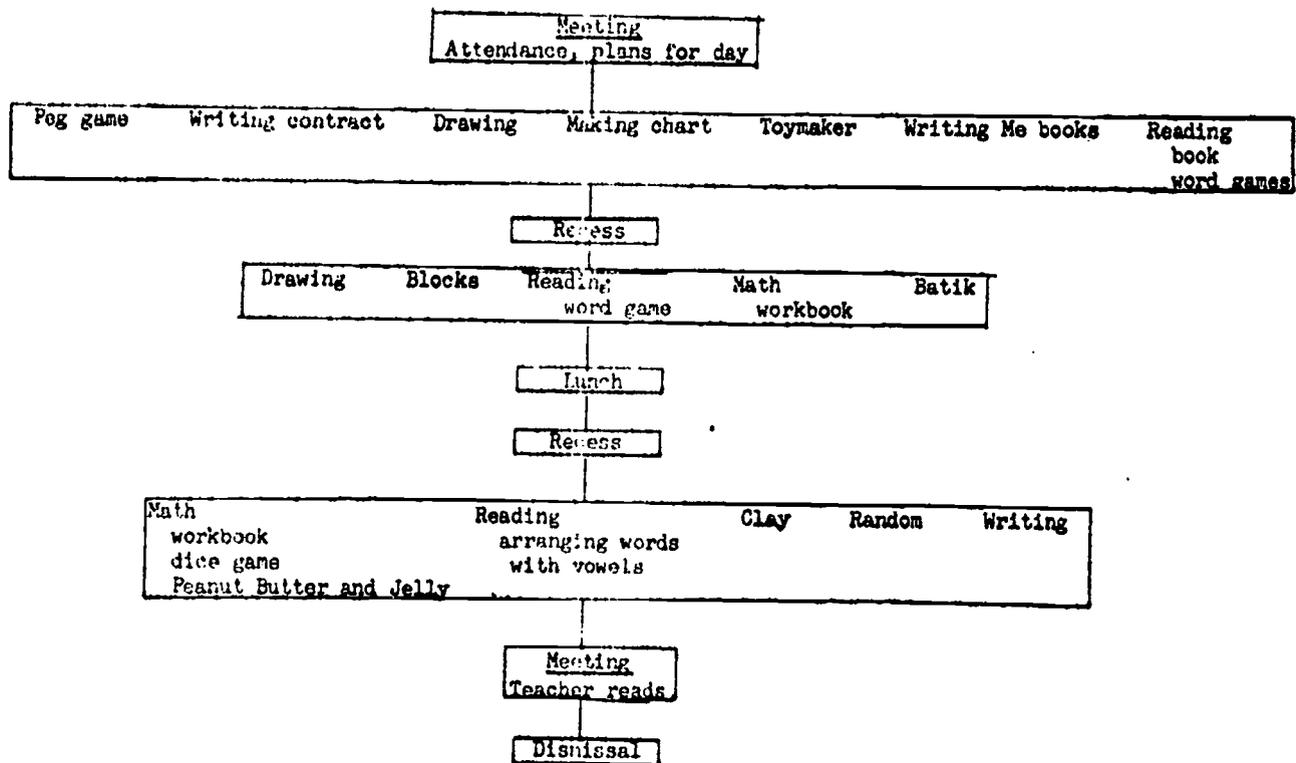
TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY



CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)



ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(5 children observed)

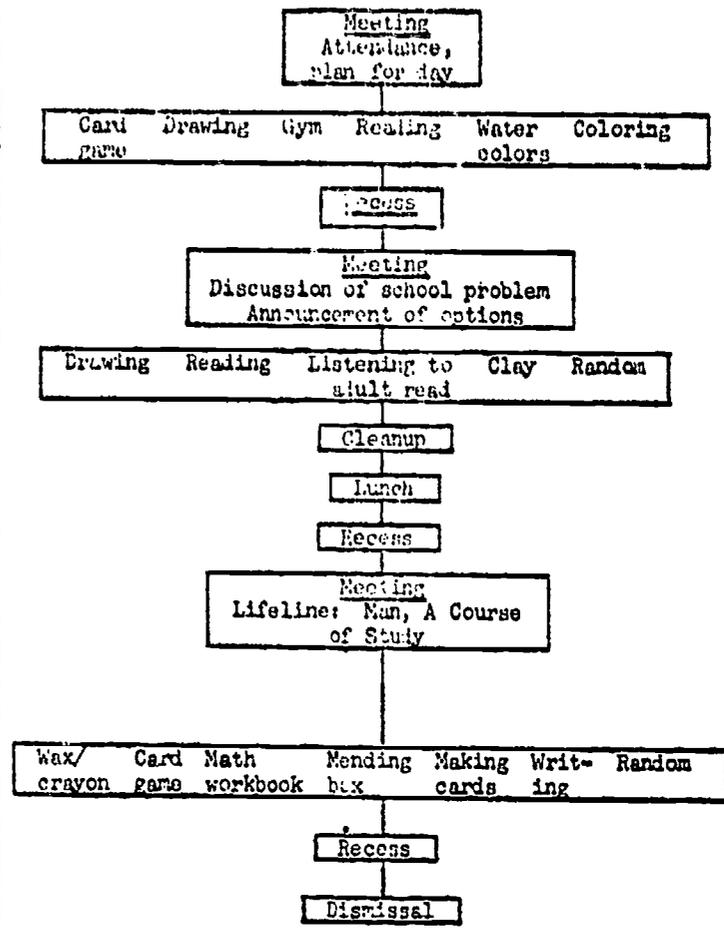
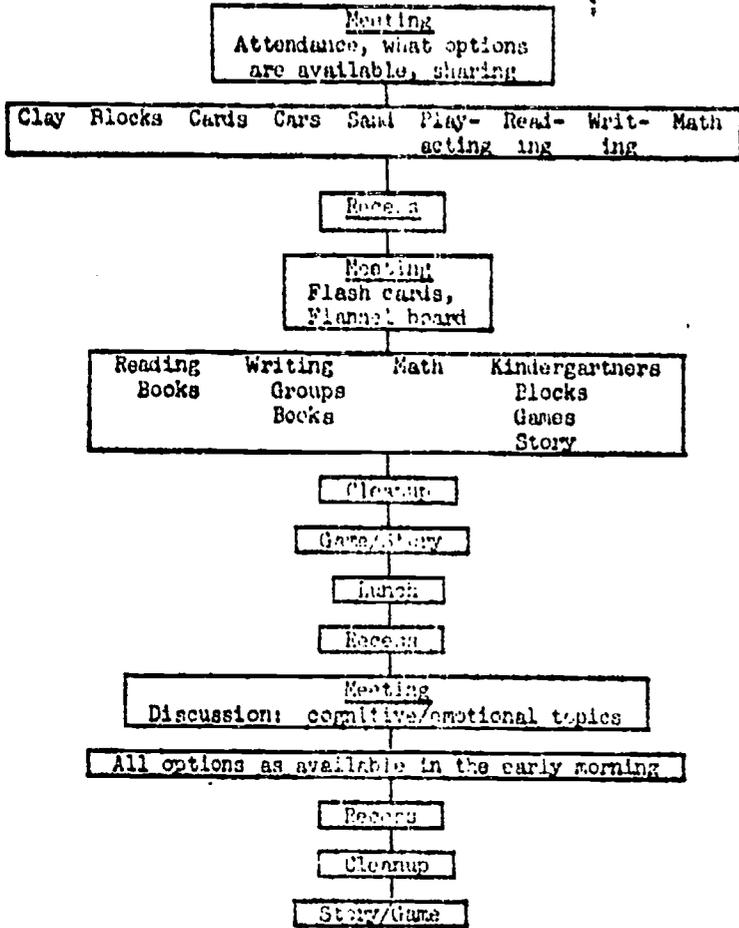


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TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY

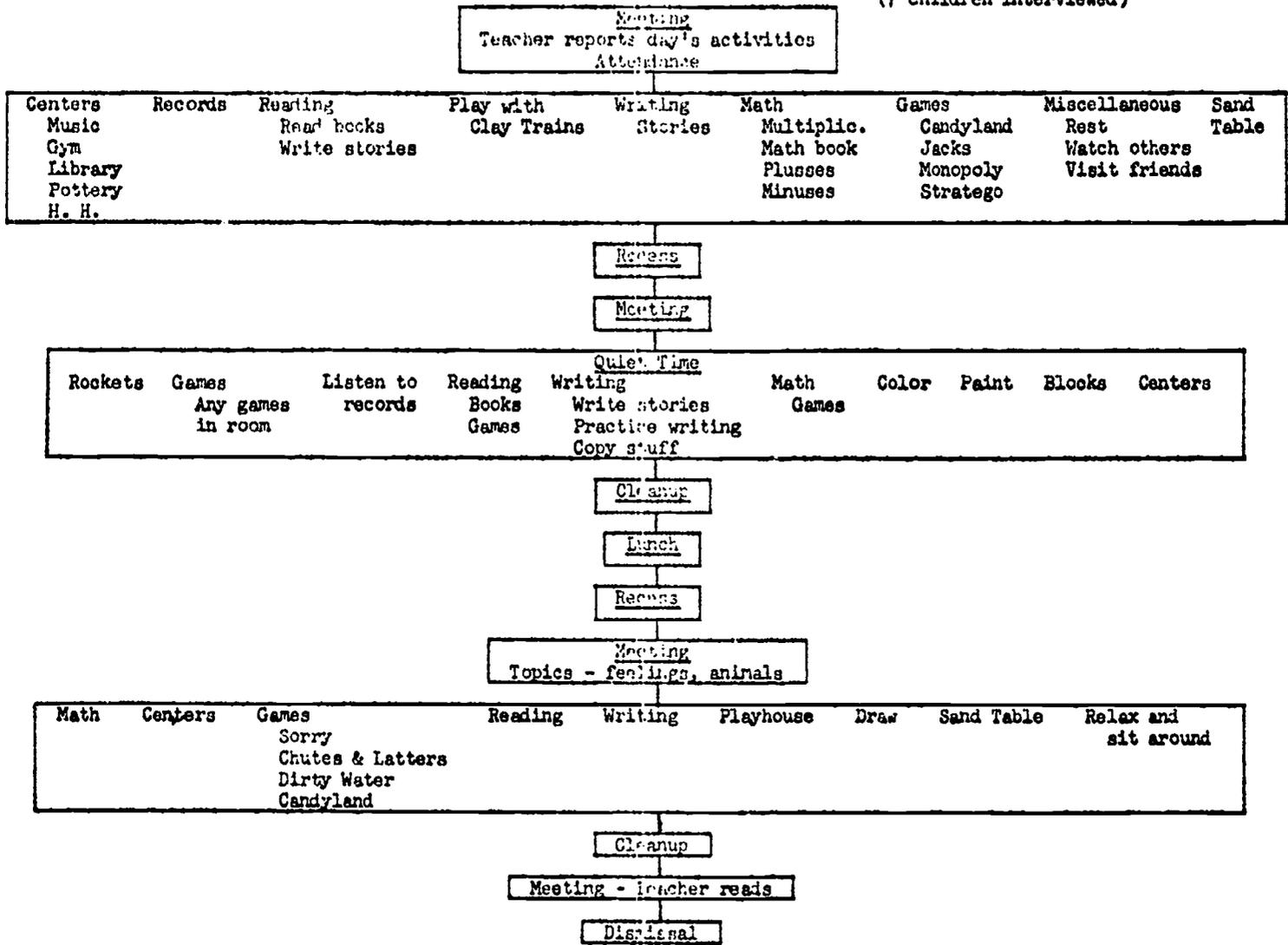
PRIMARY ROOM F

ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(5 children observed - 2 absent)



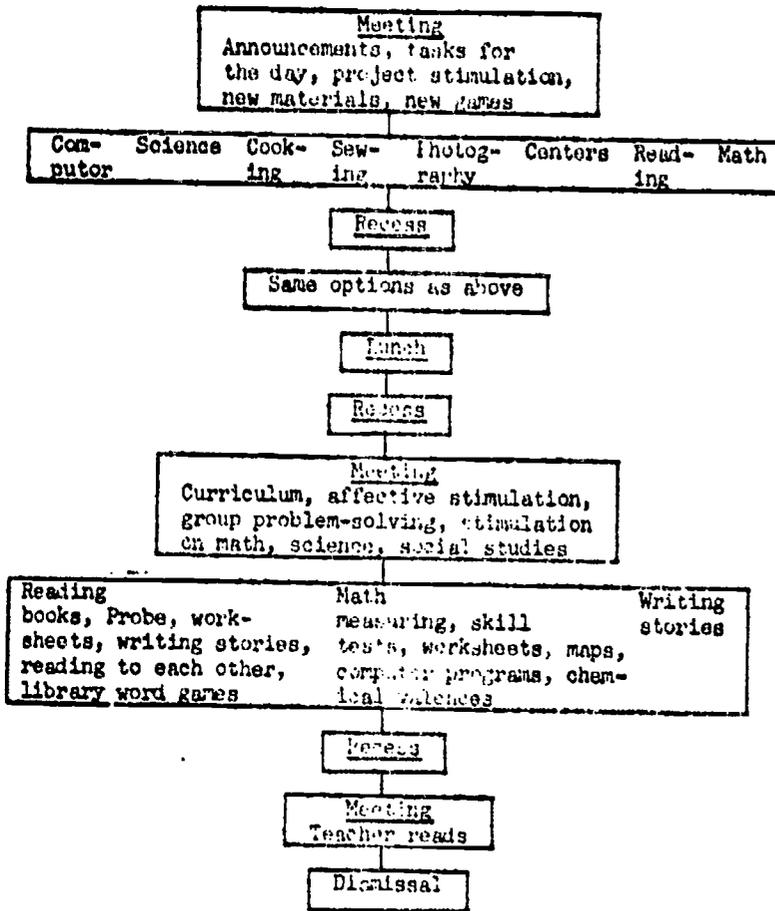
PRIMARY ROOM F

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(7 children interviewed)

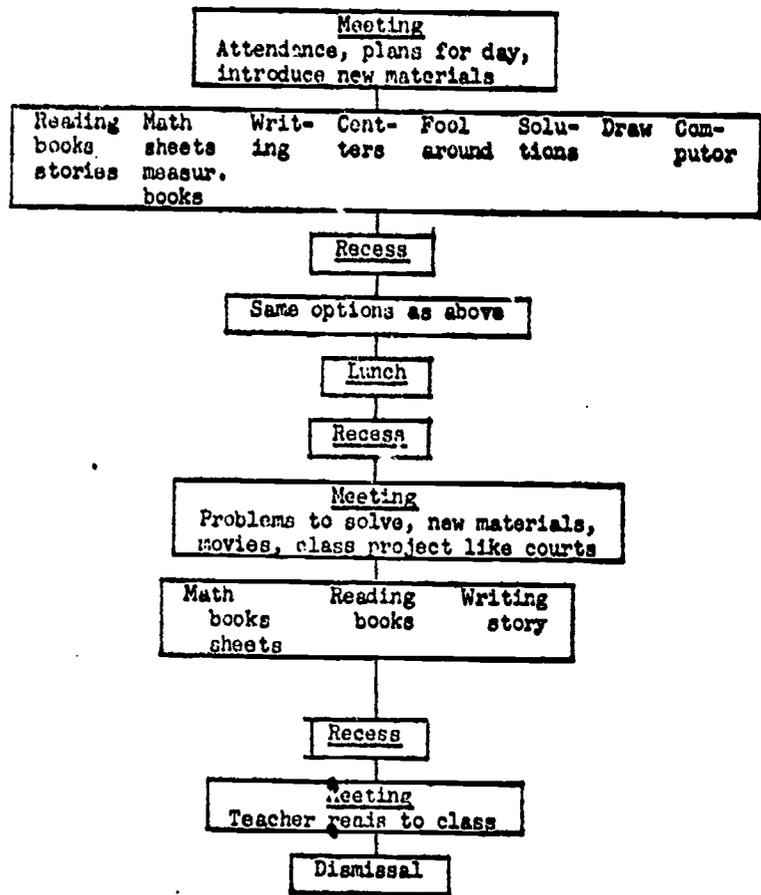


INTERMEDIATE ROOM A

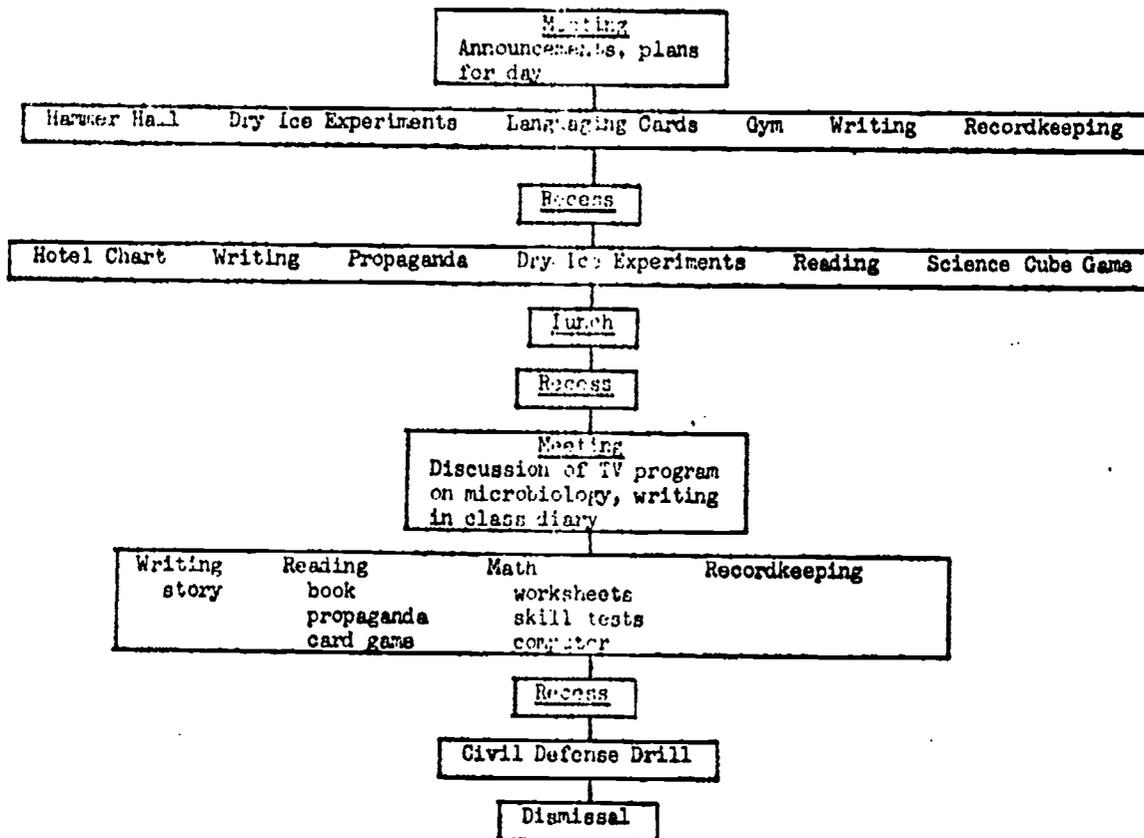
TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY



CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)



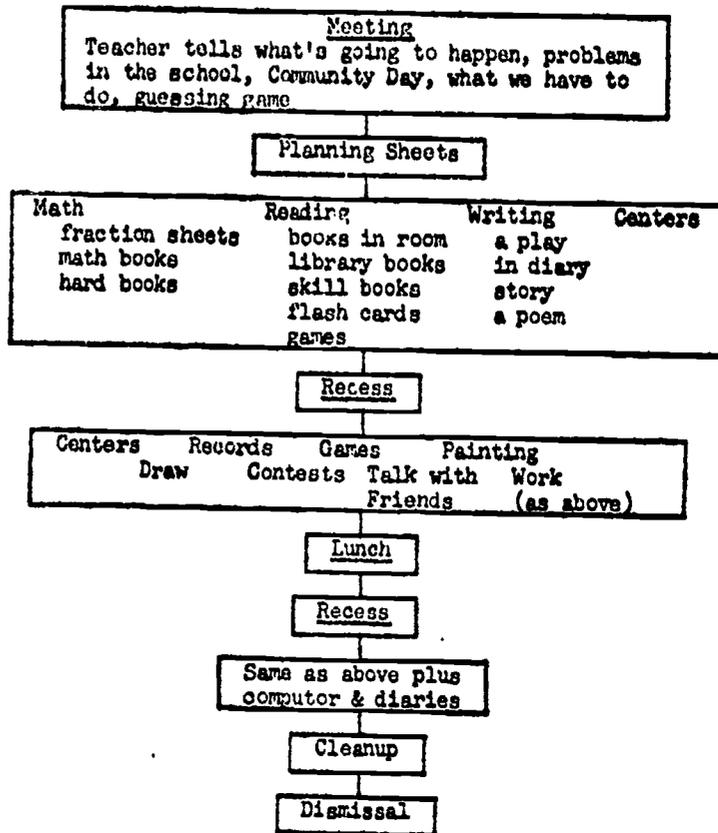
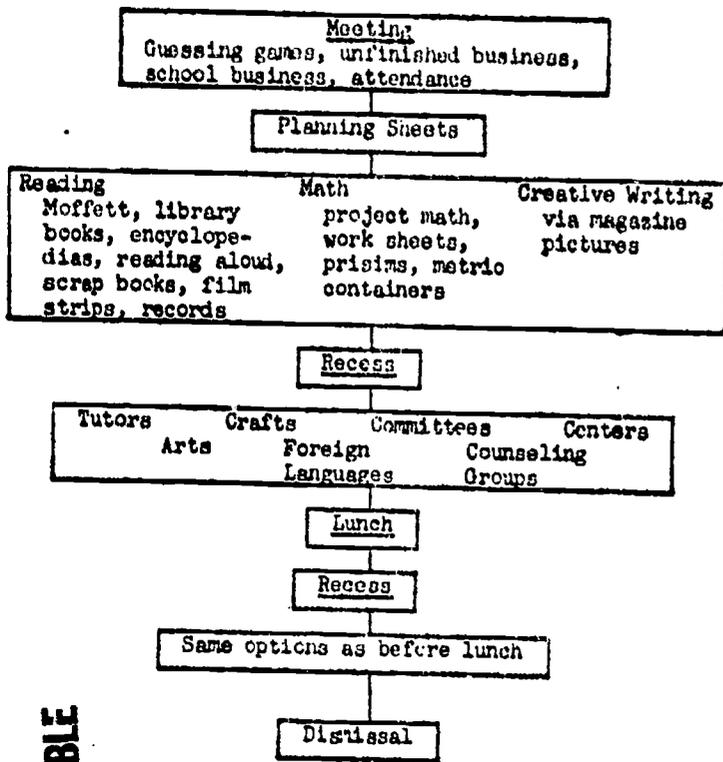
ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(5 children observed)



TEACHER'S PERCEPTION OF DAY

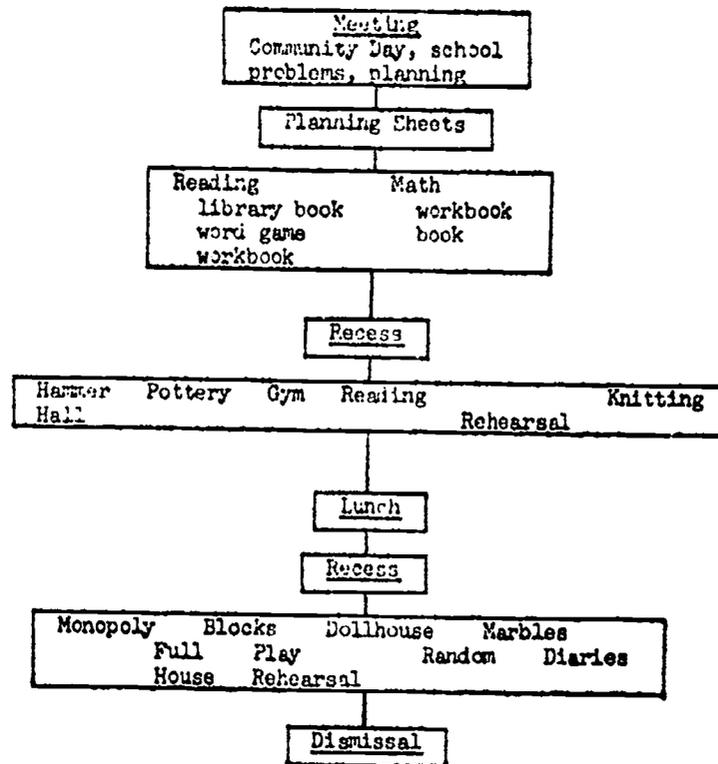
INTERMEDIATE ROOM B

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(6 children interviewed)



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ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(6 children observed)



INTERMEDIATE ROOM C

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(9 children interviewed)

Circle Meeting
Talk about problems, plans for day, plan for special projects

Centers Math books worksheets games
Reading books worksheets
Writing stories books
Drawing
Macramé
Sew

Recess

Same options as before recess

Lunch

Recess

Meeting
Squirms, plans for p.m. (MMF)

Math books worksheets games
Reading books worksheets games
Writing stories reports plays
"read anything"

Outside Games Centers Draw

Cleanup

Meeting

Dismissal

ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(7 children observed)

Meeting
Filmstrip, plans for day

Gym

Finger Doodles Drawing Painting Identifying skull
Mini-kites Conversation

Cleanup

Lunch

Recess

Meeting
Poetry, Recipes

Reading Math book worksheets
language cards
Spatter painting newspaper
Writing books
Play-ground

Cleanup

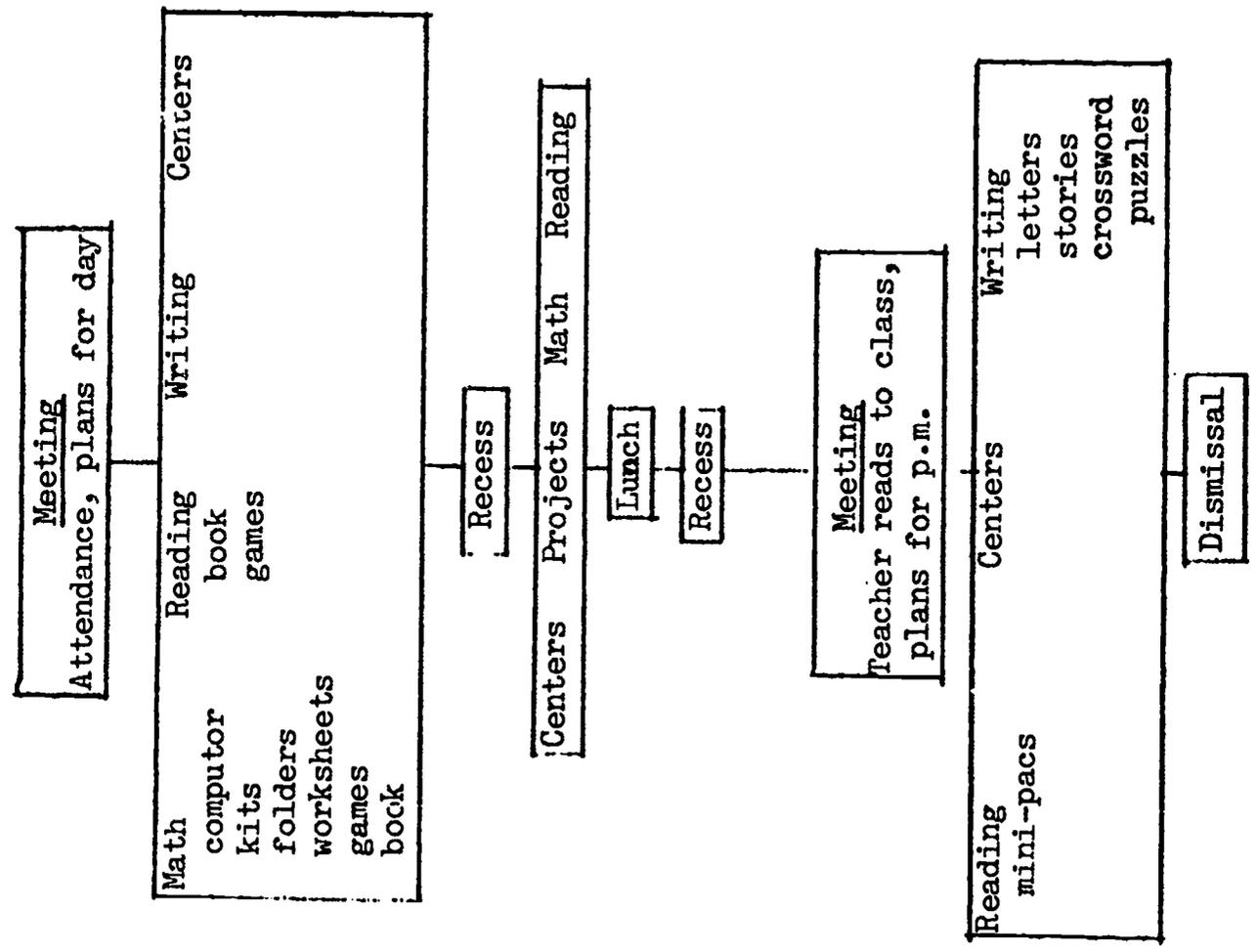
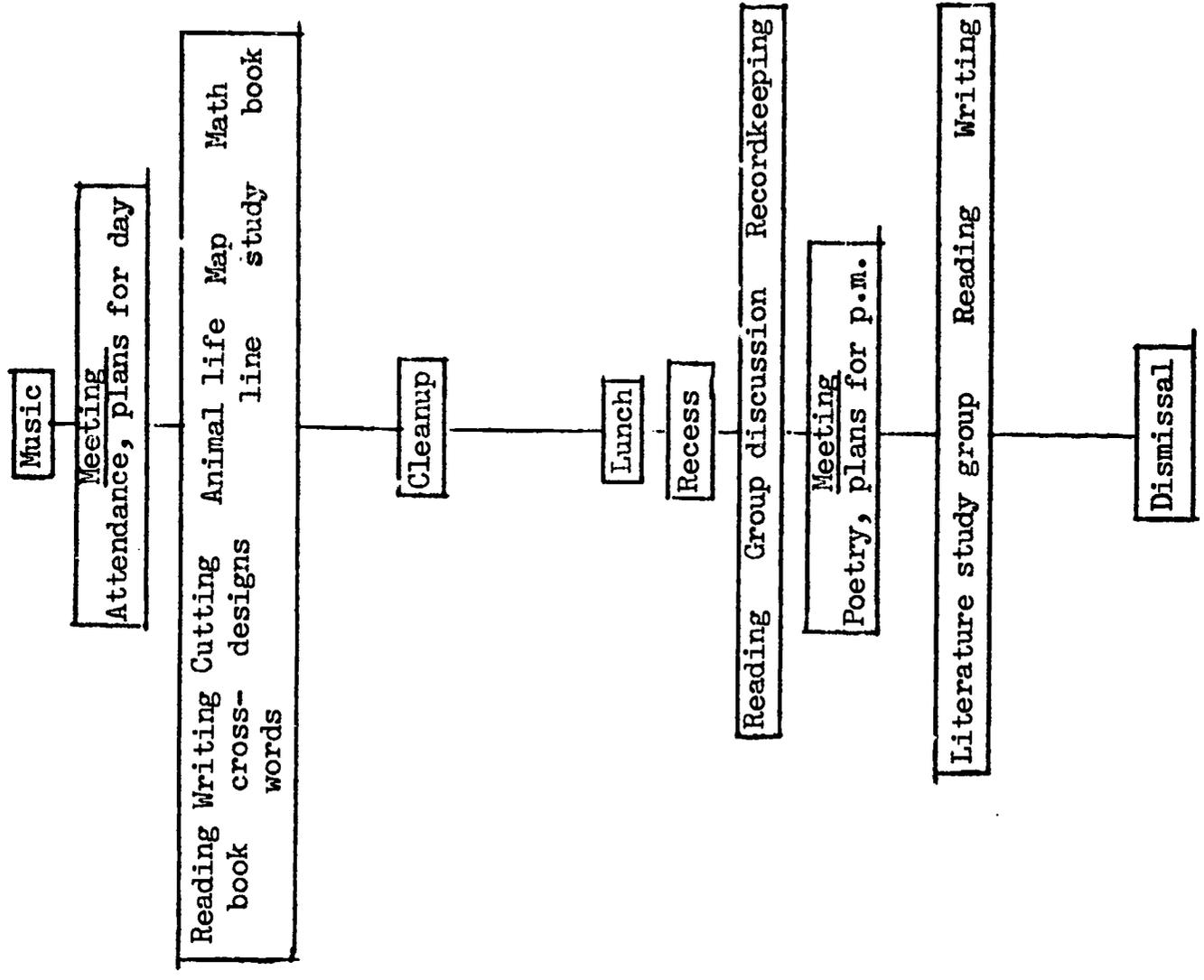
Dismissal

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INTERMEDIATE ROOM D

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ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN INTERVIEWED
OBSERVED DURING ACTUAL DAY
(4 children observed)

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF DAY
(5 children interviewed)



Contribution to Environment

The second half of the interview relates to the question of how children perceive the roles of various people in determining the environment of the school. The questions were designed to tap the child's perceptions of:

1. the contribution of the child to the classroom environment,
2. the contribution of adults (primarily the teacher) to the classroom environment, and
3. the contribution of peers to the classroom environment.

Some of the questions were developed by Nancy Miller, Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Dakota. Other questions which seemed relevant to the Marcy program in particular were written, pretested, and included in the interview. The questions listed here show their relationship to 1, 2, and 3 above:

1. Tell me something that you would like to learn or know more about.
 - a. Could you do that in school? 1
 - b. How would you go about it? 1
 - c. How could the teacher (name) help you? 2
2. Can you bring things into the classroom from home if you want to? 1
 - a. Do you ever do that? 1
 - b. What things have you brought in? 1
 - c. What did you do with that? 1
(or) What happened to that?
3. What does _____ (teacher's name) do? 2
 - a. What does she like to do best? 2
 - b. When do you talk to _____ (teacher)? 2
 - c. Does _____ (teacher) talk to you about what you're doing? 2
4. Do you help other kids do things in the classroom? 1 and 3
 - a. What do you help them do? 1 and 3
 - b. How do you help them? (If not answered in a.)
5. What do you do if you need help with something? 1
 - a. Do you ever ask another child to help you? 3
 - b. Do you ever ask a grownup to help you? 2
6. Are there times when it's hard to work because of other children? 3
 - a. What do the children do that makes it hard for you to work?
 - b. Do they do this a lot? 3
 - c. What do you do when they do this? 1
7. Do grownups in school ever do things to you that you don't like? 2
 - a. What things?
 - b. What do you do then? 1

8. Do other kids ever do things to you in school that you don't like? 3
 - a. What things?
 - b. What can you do to make them stop? 1
 - c. Will other kids help you? 3
 - d. Will a grownup ever help you? 2

9. How would you like to make your classroom different?
 - a. Could you do that? 1
 - b. How would you go about it? 1

Children's responses were reported, in detail but anonymously, to their own classroom teacher.

Interview responses were then coded as follows:

- 1 = firm negative contribution to environment
- 2 = uncertain contribution to environment
- 3 = firm positive contribution to environment

The results for the ten classrooms are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Children's perceptions of the contribution of the child, the teacher, and of peers to the classroom environment.

Classroom	Number Interviewed	Contribution of Child	Contribution of Teacher	Contribution of Peers
Primary				
A	5	2.4	2.4	1.7
B	6	2.9	2.1	2.1
C	5	2.5	2.1	1.6
D	5	2.4	2.1	2.0
E	6	2.6	2.4	2.0
F	7	2.4	2.4	2.2
Intermediate				
A	5	2.7	2.3	2.4
B	6	2.8	2.7	2.0
C	9	2.4	2.6	2.1
D	5	2.6	2.3	1.7

Significance of Interview Responses

It is important for the reader to be aware that the information from these interviews represent only one piece of a much larger goal evaluation. Additional information about the goal to which the interview relates plus two other high priority goals was gained throughout the year by extensive observation, teacher interviews and questionnaires, and collection of children's work. This information is available from SEA Internal Evaluation, "Marcy Open School: 1973-1974 Goal Evaluation." It is impossible to arrive at any firm conclusions on the basis of children's interview responses alone. This information must be seen in the context of the whole - not as a whole in and of itself.

It is reasonable, however, to point to several trends which the reader might note in the interviews:

1. Choices available vary during the school day. All rooms have periods of time when all children are expected to be involved in the same activities - primarily meeting times, recess, lunch, cleanup, and some involvements in interest centers. In addition, most rooms have one period of the day when reading, writing, and math are "required" activities. The activities which both children and teachers see as being appropriate under those labels are much broader than the traditional textbook-workbook choice, but they are, nevertheless, required areas of activity. All rooms also have other periods of the day when the range of possible activities is much broader and includes many more options both in the classroom and in the rest of the building.

2. In most cases there is a high degree of consistency between children's verbalizations, as revealed in the interview, and their actual behavior, as revealed in the observations. That is, if they said that they could do reading, writing and math and that those involved books and papers, those tended to be the activities which they in fact, did do. If they said that they could do all kinds of things like play with trucks, sand, do art projects, play games, go to centers and a wide variety of activities, those wide variety of things

tended to be, in fact, what they did do. It is important to reiterate that approximately three to four weeks elapsed between the observation and the interviews.

3. There are some inconsistencies between the teacher's and the children's perceptions. In some cases the teacher indicates that it is appropriate to go to interest centers during a particular time period. The children did not verbalize that as a possibility nor did they actually behave in that way. The larger inconsistency emerges as the teachers sometimes report a much wider range of possible activities - particularly under the categories of reading, writing and math - than children either report or practice. This is not to suggest that none of the children in a classroom understand the possibilities which are open to them, as only about 20% of the children are included in the interviews. It is clear, however, that at least some of the children are not understanding that the range of activities are possible which the teacher reports.

4. The series of charts on each room clearly show the variations of structures between the classrooms throughout the school. These variations include the general structure of the day and the kinds of activities which are made available for children in various rooms. The school's emphasis on personalization of curriculum and acceptance of various teaching and learning styles would indicate that these variations are healthy.

5. Table 1 shows some interesting perceptions of children in how they see the contributions which various people make toward the classroom environment. Table 1 shows a fairly consistent direction of contribution moving from the child to the teacher to peer with a smaller gap between the contribution of the child and the contribution of the teacher and a larger gap generally visible between contribution of the teacher and the contribution of peers. This is certainly in line with public statements by the school which voice a commitment to the child and the teacher both working to determine the academic and social

setting of the school. However, the low contribution of peers in many of the classrooms may be worthy of further consideration.

Conclusions

The information from the children's interviews confirms that children at Marcy Open School do, in fact, understand that they have many possible choices in what they do during the day and that they, along with their teachers and peer group, contribute to the academic and social setting of the school.

An important future step in the evaluation will be to assess the interactions which take place between adults and children in facilitating children's growth in learning to make good choices and to learn from having made bad choices.